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ABSTRACT

Schools have been accused of being insensitive to students' cultural backgrounds, and thus of failing to serve some populations because instruction and curricula are designed for middle class children. But teachers should be cautious about applying the findings of ethnographic studies which address this problem. Although ethnographic studies sometimes reveal ways in which cultural incongruity contributes to inequity, the existing research does not imply that teachers should always promote cultural congruity. For example, Au and Jordan's well-known study demonstrates how cultural differences hindered the learning of Hawaiian students, and how the improvement of classroom communication fit better with student background increased learning. But it is difficult to extract implications for preservice teachers from this study, and there is apparently no straightforward link between research studies and teachers' classroom practice. Furthermore, there are substantial costs in making curricula continuous with students' everyday lives. The examination of analytic studies of everyday experience, learning theory, and empirical studies in science education reveals that attempts to connect curricula to everyday life can impede students' understanding of disciplinary concepts and may restrict their range of vision. Ethnographic studies can have value in helping future teachers to reflect on how their actions are culturally influenced and how individual differences do not imply deficiencies, but prospective teachers need intellectual tools and adequate practice to profit from ethnographic research. (KH)

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CULTURAL INCONGRUITIES AND INEQUITIES OF SCHOOLING: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH?

John S. Zeuli and Robert E. Floden

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Abstract

Ethnographic studies, like all research studies, provide no easy answers about what teachers should do. This paper supports that general point by showing the complexities surrounding issues of cultural congruity. Although ethnographic studies sometimes reveal ways in which incongruity contributes to inequity, the research does not imply that teachers should always promote cultural congruity. Unless teacher educators understand the problems underlying endorsements of cultural congruity, they may contribute to the miseducation of future teachers and their students.

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CULTURAL INCONGRUITIES AND INEQUITIES OF SCHOOLING: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH?[1]

John S. Zeuli and Robert E. Floden

Schools have been accused of being insensitive to students' cultural backgrounds, and thus of failing to serve some populations because instruction and curricula are designed for middle-class children, only one of the groups public schooling should serve. Ethnographers (e.g., Au & Mason, 1981; Erickson, 1986; Jordan, 1985; Philips, 1983) often respond to this failure by stressing the positive educational effects of making classroom communication fit with students' specific backgrounds. In addition, ethnographers (Au and Jordan, 1981; Philips, 1983) stress the benefits of making curricula more continuous with students' cultural backgrounds. Cognitive psychologists studying learning in ordinary life (e.g., Rogoff & Gardner, 1984) likewise suggest that teachers can enhance students' academic performance by making connections to students' everyday concepts and experiences. It would be easy for teacher educators to conclude that they should encourage future teachers to make their classrooms reflect students' everyday culture, paying particular attention to what researchers have learned about culturally congruent communication patterns and curricula.

But before accepting this conclusion, teacher educators should recognize that "cultural congruence" may not be the solution to the inequities of schooling. Decisions about what and how to teach require careful assessment of the research on cultural congruence. Teacher educators must understand the

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[1] John Zeuli is a research assistant with the Conceptual Analytic Project. Robert Floden is a senior researcher with the project and professor of teacher education at Michigan State University. The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Margret Buchmann, Douglas R. Campbell, Susan Irwin, and Michael W. Sedlak. They also wish to thank our colleagues who participated in the school and society seminars for their helpful criticisms of an earlier draft.

practical and theoretical problems underlying these endorsements of cultural congruity. Unless they do so, they may contribute to the miseducation of future teachers and their students. To illustrate this point, we use a well known ethnographic research project (Au & Jordan, 1981). The project provides an example of the apparent positive effects of making classroom communication patterns fit better with student backgrounds. We then analyze the potential problems in drawing implications for preservice teachers from this study and from other ethnographic studies. The analysis illustrates the general point that there is no straightforward link between research studies and teachers' classroom practice (Buchmann, 1984, in press).

Also, we raise specific questions about the case for culturally congruent curricula and instructional methods. We argue that there are substantial costs in making curricula continuous with students' everyday lives (Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille, in press). Drawing on analytic studies of everyday experience, learning theory, and empirical studies in science education, we argue that attempts to connect curricula to everyday life impede students' understanding of disciplinary concepts and may restrict their range of vision (Chandler, 1984; Kleinfeld, 1984). We conclude by considering what this analysis suggests about the use of ethnographic studies in teacher education.

Should Classroom Interaction Be Culturally Congruent?

Erickson's (1986) overview of qualitative research in education suggests that the risk of school failure for minority students is increased by incongruities between classroom interaction patterns and those prevalent in the students' culture. He contends that subtle, subcultural differences between the community and school environment can lead to "interactional difficulties, misunderstandings, and negative attributions between teachers and students in the classroom" (p. 135). These incongruities between the students' everyday

culture and school may include ways of showing attention, ways of asking questions, patterns of taking turns, and other subtle action and communication patterns (Au & Jordan, 1981; Heath, 1982; Philips, 1983). Most teachers are recruited from the dominant culture (Lortie, 1975), and their behavior is shaped by that culture. Thus, for students from nondominant cultures, breakdowns in communication between teachers and students can stem from differences between the patterns of communication in school and everyday life (Au & Mason, 1981; Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Jordan, 1985).

Description of these differences must not be confused with comparisons between the value of student subcultures and the mainstream culture. More than one pattern of interaction is suitable for meaningful communication and the organization of everyday life. The patterns of communication and organization in school often simply represent conventional modes, not a choice of the one most suitable strategy. As a result, many ethnographers believe that making classroom instructional settings more congruent with the students' own culture will enhance opportunities for student learning.

For example, Au and Jordan (1981) demonstrate how cultural differences can hinder classroom learning. The Hawaiian students they studied had difficulties in learning to read. An early education program (the Kamehameha Early Education Program) was developed primarily to explore alternative instructional approaches, each based on different hypotheses about the sources of reading difficulty. The first hypothesis considered was that the Hawaiian students were not motivated and that they were in some way cognitively deficient. The researchers trained teachers in effective classroom management and motivational techniques and tested all the children for the cognitive and linguistic skills necessary for reading, but the results did not support the initial hypothesis. Teacher training did not significantly improve reading skills, and extensive testing found no clear deficiencies in children's prerequisite skills.

After abandoning this and other hypotheses, the researchers considered the possibility that differences between the ways children learned at home and the ways they learned at school might be the major obstacles to reading. To test this hypothesis, they organized classroom reading instruction to be more like events common in Hawaiian culture, such as "storytelling" and "talk story." In instruction modeled on "talk story," teacher and students narrated a reading lesson together, building on modes of learning closely resembling the way storytelling occurs in the Hawaiian culture. The children were familiar with telling stories together, "each supplying separate pieces of information, corroborating claims, or building upon one another's words in rhythmic alternation" (Au & Mason, 1983, p. 148). In contrast to conventional classroom practices where the chance to talk is usually given to only one person at a time, in the talk story instruction, taking turns among the children sustained the involvement of others. After a full year of using this reading program, the researchers found "a dramatic increase in reading achievement, to a mean score about grade level" (Au & Jordan, 1981, p. 141).

Implications from Ethnographic Descriptions for Teaching Practice?

The research of Au and Jordan (1981) is intriguing because of its imaginative approach and apparent success. Minority students significantly improved their reading skills through a culture-based approach to modifying classroom instruction. Although there were concurrent efforts to implement a more comprehension-driven approach to reading, the authors emphasize that most program effectiveness is closely related to culturally congruent instruction.

Teachers reading about such studies in their preservice preparation may think that in order to increase student learning, they should generally make their classroom interactions more congruent with students' cultures. Whether the teacher education students imagine they will eventually teach Black,

Chicano, or Native American students, they may conclude that cultural congruency in the classroom will help students learn and make classroom interactions more comfortable.

It is essential, however, that teacher education students distinguish between what ethnographic studies can contribute to awareness of cultural differences and what they imply about guidelines for classroom practice. While becoming aware of cultural differences can be educational, such research studies do not imply that teachers should make their classrooms culturally congruent. Kleinfeld (1983) discusses one education student who illustrates what she fears education students often conclude from anthropology and education courses. She states that they come away with the simplistic paradigm that the educational problems of Native children are caused by cultural conflicts between the school and community. And since it is wrong to change the Native culture, the schools must adapt to fit the culture (p. 285). Teacher educators should help their students avoid the conclusion that research studies immediately lead to decisions about teaching practice.[2] These obstacles, of course, occur in any attempt to move from research to practice (Buchmann, 1984, in press; Floden, 1985). We illustrate how they arise with ethnographic studies.

Discovering Classroom Incongruities: What Are the Practical Problems?

Before teachers should legitimately conclude that they should strive for culturally congruent interactions with students, they need to consider whether significant obstructive differences in interaction actually exist in their

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[2] While Kleinfeld (1983) provides us with one example that may be common, it is beyond the scope of this paper to empirically demonstrate the consequences of congruency teaching. We make a commonsense argument that such a mistake is plausible and should therefore be guarded against. For other commonsense analyses of teacher education curriculum, see Howe (1986) and Zeuli and Buchmann (forthcoming).

school and classrooms. Teachers will not know in advance which patterns of interaction will be prevalent in their students' communities, and which of those lead to learning difficulties, because they differ from the dominant school culture. Because the mainstream culture tends to interpenetrate many subcultures, observed incongruities may not be extreme enough to warrant significant change. The fact that classroom groups are drawn from several different subcultures makes it even more difficult to tell how students are similar to or different from those described in any ethnographic study and also makes it difficult to decide what to make of these facts when designing instruction. Moreover, superficial similarities in ethnicity or socioeconomic characteristics do not imply that local communities are like those in which ethnographic studies were conducted (Jordan, 1985). For example, Chandler (1984) reports that several disparate Hispanic groups could be distinguished in as small an area as a Dallas barrio (p. 177).

Deciding which cultural incongruities actually are hindering learning and determining how they might be changed also present difficult problems. Preservice teachers probably will not appreciate the time and effort required to determine which cultural incongruities (if any) are contributing to low student achievement. Ethnographic study of the interaction patterns in a specific community requires intense observation, by a trained observer, over an extended period of time. Isolating areas where change may be indicated requires showing that community members interact in ways that are significantly different from interactions in the school. This, in turn, requires a detailed understanding of both interactions in the community and interactions between students and teacher (McGroarty, 1986). For example, in her study of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation, Philips (1983) takes great pains to show that geographically, economically, and socially the reservation is a distinct cultural entity that has retained and evoked ways of verbal and nonverbal

communication different from the mainstream Anglo culture. Thus, initial determination of sociolinguistic events that may lead to pedagogical change is a long and difficult process.

Furthermore, teachers would have to devote a good deal of time and effort to bring about the proper intervention. Cazden (1983) cites only two examples where ethnographers not only described existing conditions but also remained to work with educators to change practice. However, close collaboration between researchers and teachers is a necessary element for this change model (Dias, Moll, & Mehan, 1986). In one example describing this process, Heath (1982) highlights the practical difficulties involved in trying to determine if cultural differences exist and then attempting to initiate changes in the classroom. Since neither teacher training programs nor the daily practice of teaching usually enables practitioners to bring effective interventions to the classroom, fostering professional cooperation is as essential as having adequate ethnographic data. Teachers "had to know what and how they and their students learned in language socialization, and they had to take part in collecting data to answer these questions" (Heath, 1982, p. 126). Without clear commitments from the school district and teachers' own commitment to such a major project, recommendations that endorse cultural congruency would be ineffectual.

Making Classrooms Culturally Congruent: What Are the Theoretical Considerations?

Helping preservice teachers understand the practical problems is, however, not enough. Teacher educators must also help them understand that links between research studies and classroom practice are rarely straightforward (McGroarty, 1986; Buchmann, 1984). Even if researchers gather adequate ethnographic data on their schools and communities and find that culturally incongruent classroom interactions did contribute to lower achievement, no

single appropriate line of action is implied. Although Au and Jordan (1981) claim that having the school develop learning situations more like those children are familiar with is one avenue of improvement, they also admit that "it is not simple to deduce exactly what a culturally appropriate solution will be" (p. 151). What is culturally appropriate may mean making less culturally specific changes, for example, introducing cooperative learning methods in classrooms (Kagan, 1986). The appropriate intervention need not include changing the classroom environment to conform to students' unique and specific cultural experiences.

Ethnographers do acknowledge that a solution does not have to include making the school environment isomorphic with the students' culture (Jordan, 1985). An educationally appropriate solution may, in fact, have nothing to do with cultural congruity. There may be other factors operating in the classroom that could be changed to promote student learning. Erickson (1986), for example, mentions the DISTAR program as an example of a school intervention that succeeds even though it does not produce culturally congruent classrooms:

> Highly ritualized lesson interaction formats appear to lead to higher achievement by cultural minority children even if the lesson formats are not congruent with cultural patterns for the social organization of interaction that are found in the student's home and community. (p. 136)

Though he has elsewhere bee critical of the program (1984), Erickson argues that DISTAR'S success may be related to the fact that teachers using it make classroom expectations clear and explicit, and points out that its success widens the range of policy options available to teachers.

However, the ways many researchers (including ethnographers) write their reports make it understandable that many practitioners see more direct links between research and action than are actually present (Buchmann, 1984, in press; Kepler, 1980; Kleinfeld, McDiarmid, Grubis, & Parrett, 1983). Kleinfeld et al. (1983) point out that cultural congruency research is so seemingly

self-evident, researchers sometimes "slip into the error of interpreting their results to accord with their theory" (p. 100).

Although researchers often acknowledge that improving learning through congruent classrooms is difficult and that other means may be available, these qualifications can be easy to overlook. Au and Kawakami (1985), for example, conclude that their research with Hawaiian children "leads us to believe that cultural compatibility in interactional patterns may be a necessary, and not just a nice aspect of effective reading instruction for culturally different minority students" (p. 410). Also, Philips (1983) describes the type of physical control Indian children use within their own culture and the type that occurs in school. The context of the quote describes a difference between the types of physical control at home and what teachers encourage in the classroom.

> In practice, classroom interaction rarely provides the opportunity for or fosters the expression of either type of [physical] control. The development of active physical control is allocated to physical education sessions and recess on the playground. And although first-grade teachers occasionally introduce games that require physical activity in the classroom . . . such activities occur infrequently, and do not really call for the types of control in motion that Indian children have developed. (p. 105)

From this passage, a reader might conclude that it is appropriate to structure the classroom to accommodate these students' cultural differences. However, even though the cultural description plays a role in determining cultural differences and offers important information, nothing in such descriptions suggests what interventions will, or ought to, accomplish.

What Is the Relationship Between Continuity and Conceptual Learning?

Clearly, prospective teachers must not jump to conclusions about the implications of ethnographic research for classroom interactions. Shifting our focus to instructional content, we likewise suggest that teacher educators should be careful not to lead preservice teachers to think that research

studies imply that curricula should be made more congruent with students' everyday culture. As before, such conclusions about cultural congruity are encouraged by ethnographers (Philips, 1983; Au & Jordan, 1981) and cognitive psychologists focusing on learning in everyday social contexts (Rogoff & Gardner, 1984).

Philips (1983) argues that universities training teachers who will work in minority communities "need to provide them with more specialized preparation for adapting their traditional teaching methods to culturally different communities" (p. 134-135). Au and Jordan (1981) attribute the success of their reading program to using content that was familiar to the Hawaiian students. Also, Rogoff and Gardner (1984) claim that school-like tasks can be effectively accomplished through making connections to what children are already familiar with in everyday contexts. Among these researchers, there is no suggestion that children's everyday concepts may be a hindrance to school learning, nor any mention that school learning is different from learning in everyday contexts. It is questionable, however, whether teachers' efforts to connect subject matter immediately to students' everyday concepts and experiences foster student learning and cognitive growth.

Connecting Curricula to Students' Backgrounds: What Are the Problems?

As with continuities in classroom interactions, there are practical and theoretical difficulties with congruity concerning instructional content and methods. The practical difficulties parallel those for classroom interaction. The development and use of culturally appropriate curricula is a long and tedious process. It requires extended interaction between the local and educational communities to determine how culturally relevant materials can be implemented appropriately (Butterfield, 1983). If these practical difficulties are overcome, Butterfield argues that a culturally appropriate curriculum

can be effective. He admits, however, that there is yet skimpy evidence that it increases student academic achievement (p. 64).

The conclusion that content or instructional methods should be culturally congruent also presents serious theoretical difficulties. Congruence is not only one among several options for action, but is actually an option with substantial costs (Chandler, 1984; Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille, in press; Kleinfeld, 1983, 1984). Relying on content or methods of learning derived from students' cultural backgrounds may impede students' conceptual learning. The focus of this criticism refers to attempts to match curricula and methods of instruction to the everyday experiences of students from <u>any</u> background, not just minority students. The strength of it draws from an analysis of what characterizes everyday experiences (Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille, in press; Schutz, 1971), learning theory (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), and empirical studies that support the view that students' everyday concepts interfere with the understanding of science concepts (Eaton, Anderson, & Smith, 1984; Roth, 1985).

While students' everyday experiences are the source of impressive and affectively charged learning, they are not unmixed goods. They also exaggerate the importance of individual, close-to-home experience, restrict students' range of vision, and impede students' understanding of disciplinary concepts (Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille, in press; see also Chandler, 1984). Everyday life is not set up for learning that transcends its own boundaries. The function of cultural patterns within it is "to eliminate troublesome inquiries by offering ready-made directions for use, to replace truth hard to attain by comfortable truisms, and to substitute the self-explanatory for the questionable" (Schutz, 1971, p. 95).

Everyday life, however, is only <u>one</u> of many realities in which one can participate. For example, scientific thinking or theorizing opens up a

nonegocentric world. Students' immersion in everyday life becomes problematic because attitudes and beliefs developed within it are based on limited and particular perspectives. These attitudes and beliefs do not appear as interpretations "but forthright apprehensions of the real world; further probing seems pointless" (Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille, in press; see also Buchmann, 1985). The distortions and limits of this framework are difficult to overcome. But this makes it all the more important that students have opportunities to break with everyday modes of experience. Close connections between school learning and students' everyday life will make these breaks more difficult to attain.

The work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978), the Soviet psychologist writing in the 1920s and 1930s whose work has recently won attention and acclaim among Western scholars, supports the view that breaks with everyday modes of experience promotes students' conceptual learning. Studies (e.g., Erickson, 1984; Rogoff & Lave, 1984) often cite his analysis of cognitive development in social contexts and of how others (e.g., teachers) can foster this growth. Although parts of Vygotsky's work support contemporary analyses of learning outside school, the studies seldom acknowledge that Vygotsky also stressed the importance of discontinuity in school learning.

Vygotsky (1962, 1978) emphasized the importance of children learning in collaboration with adults during school instruction. He did not argue that connections to students' familiar experiences and concepts promote conceptual learning. Instead, he argued that schools are the creation of a special context for purposes distinct from everyday learning (see Zeuli, 1986). One problem with everyday concepts, according to Vygotsky (1962) is that they are "saturated with experience" (p. 108). Children are less conscious of them, much in the same way that children use sophisticated grammatical forms without being able to conjugate a word or are able to point out who their relatives

are without being able to answer abstract questions of kinship. Everyday, familiar, in Vygotsky's terms, "spontaneous" concepts, are yet unsystematized, and as a result, are less subject to children's deliberate control.

Mastering disciplinary concepts that are separate from everyday life enables children to gain greater conceptual control over their everyday experience. Vygotsky suggests that teachers initially should guide students during instruction by helping them understand the systematic relationship between concepts. Later, "in the course of further schoolwork and reading" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 108), the concepts students understood in outline are connected to their personal experiences. Of course, this does not preclude children learning about their own cultures, but relying on concepts and connections learned outside the classroom does not promote students' conceptual learning.

Current research in science education supports the view that students' everyday thinking hinders their understanding of concepts in the disciplines. Learning in the disciplines often requires significant conceptual change which is initially confusing and unsettling to students. As they learn unfamiliar scientific concepts students immediately try to interpret them in terms of their own intuitive ideas. But, by trying to make what is unfamiliar familiar, students often misunderstand important concepts during instruction. Roth (1985) describes how students relate the way plants obtain food to their everyday ideas about what food is for humans. Students believe that plant food was what plants take in from the external environment or "eat," such as water, fertilizer or sunlight. This strategy of interpreting a new concept to what was already familiar to them led them to misunderstand a key concept in photosynthesis, namely, that plants make their own food.

Students' tendency to interpret school learning by means of their everyday experiences occurs in other subjects also. Eaton, Anderson, and Smith (1984) describe how students believe that they see objects because "light

shines on them and brightens them up" rather than because light is reflected off the objects. Students resisted relinquishing these faulty notions even after further instruction. Thus, teachers' attempts to build on or refine students' everyday concepts as they learn disciplinary concepts will have limited success. Because concepts in the disciplines are often so dissimilar to students' everyday concepts, connections to the latter may not enhance students' understanding but rather reinforce their misconceptions.

In summary, schools are responsible for students' ability to break with everyday experience through promoting disciplinary understanding. This break from the "taken-for-granted" is difficult, especially for anyone whose peer group does not value it (see Chandler, 1984), but it is even more difficult if it relies on content and methods of learning derived from everyday experience (Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille, in press). While not denying the value of students' personal experiences, teachers should be careful about introducing new ideas to students by showing how they relate to everyday life (see Zeuli, 1986). Content should not rely on materials drawn from the local context, but on materials set in a broader context (Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille, in press). As ethnographers and cognitive psychologists suggest, teachers do need to be sensitive to the social context of learning and provide students with instructional scaffolds (see Erickson, 1984). This does not mean, however, that making content compatible with students' cultural backgrounds will foster conceptual learning.

How Can Ethnographic Research Help Educate Prospective Teachers?

The ethnographic research finding that minority children are doing poorly in a school with culturally incongruent classrooms does not imply that teachers ought to adjust learning environments to students' different cultures. But educators continue to draw this conclusion. Cummins (1986), for example,

argues that a major reason for not making these adjustments is because culturally congruent programs "contravene the established pattern of dominant/dominated group relations" (p. 25). But, as our analysis suggests, there are good reasons why teachers should be cautious about making their classrooms culturally congruent--whether in terms of interactional patterns or instructional content. Besides the practical problems involved, there could be substantial costs to student learning. Further, a wide range of policy interventions are often at teachers' disposal; making classrooms more culturally congruent is only one, and not necessarily the best, alternative.

This is not to deny the importance of sensitizing teachers to the fact that many schools are middle-class institutions, an insight that will not come naturally to the many prospective teachers from the mainstream culture (Lortie, 1975). Thus, the list of cautions about using ethnographic research is not a wholesale critique of ethnography and its potential to improve educational practice. Ethnographic studies can have value in helping future teachers to become more reflective about their actions. They can provide teachers with opportunities to think about how their actions are culturally influenced, how they may influence the actions of others, and how individual differences do not imply deficiencies.

But prospective teachers need intellectual tools and adequate practice to deliberate profitably on the relationship between ethnographic research and the practice of teaching. When prospective teachers read ethnographic studies, teacher educators need to help them see how these descriptions can enable them to become more reflective in their professional work and to help them understand the limitations of such studies. How this can be accomplished appropriately within the contexts of these cautions is an important, but difficult question. We encourage preservice teacher educators working in this area to discuss how to use ethnographic studies profitably while, at the same

time, helping students understand the potential pitfalls in connecting classroom life to students' cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, ethnographic studies, like all research studies, provide no easy answers about what teachers should do. Because preservice teachers often can be hungry for quick and simple research implications, teacher educators must caution against those very things (Kepler, 1980; see also Zumwalt, 1982). This paper shows the complexities surrounding issues of cultural congruity. Although ethnographic studies sometimes reveal ways in which incongruity contributes to inequity, the research does not imply that teachers should always promote cultural congruity.

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